National Literacy Trust

Change your story

Early Words with Childminders

Iulia Moisi, Kirsty McDonald, and Elena Chamberlain

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Setting the scene

Early Words with Childminders is a programme delivered by the National Literacy Trust, that aims to support the practice of childminders, who may have been previously underserved in terms of accessing training around developing children's early communication, language and literacy development [1] . The programme encourages childminders to use activities supported by the Effective Provision for Pre-School Education (EPPE) project to best support early language [2] . These activities involve imaginative play, singing songs and rhymes, sharing books and stories, mark-making, getting out and about and visiting the library. Alongside this, Early Words with Childminders aims to increase childminders' skills and confidence in using language supporting strategies, by building each of the six focus activities into their daily practice, as well as their confidence and skills to engage with parents.

This report synthesises data from 11 childminders working in Swindon with children between the ages of two and four who took part in our pilot programme. The delivery of the pilot took place between September and December 2023 and 12 childminders enrolled in the programme, of which 11 completed the delivery and feedback activities. One childminder unfortunately had to drop out owing to health reasons. In this report, we use quantitative and qualitative feedback data to explore practitioners' experiences with the first iteration of Early Words with Childminders. The feedback activities completed by the practitioners included:

- Post-training feedback,
- Pre- and post-programme surveys,
- Weekly delivery logs,
- Two focus groups (at mid-delivery and at the end of the delivery period).

A note on data collection and evaluation

This evaluation uses mixed data collection methods, including quantitative and qualitative approaches, to capture the complexity of childminders' experiences with the programme. Pre- and post-programme surveys were a useful tool to evaluate changes in childminders' outcomes. Focus groups allowed us to explore the

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[1] Aaronricks, K. (2020). *Exploring a cyclical model of professional development: insights from childminders,* p.54-70.

[2] Sylva et al., (2004). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from Pre-school to end of Key Stage 1.*

similarities, differences, and complexities of childminders' experiences with the programme in more depth. Finally, delivery logs were a valuable source of information on how childminders adapted and integrated the programme into their daily practice, as well as on their views on particular activities and children's engagement with them.

Summary of key benefits

1. Childminders developed their knowledge around children's early language and literacy development, and they gained new ideas for activities to support children's language.

2. Childminders learned new things about the parents they work with and the children they care for in terms of their engagement and preferences. Some childminders had their expectations about which children and parents would/would not engage challenged.

3. Childminders felt the training they received was sufficient and equipped them with the necessary skills and confidence to deliver the programme content.

4. The programme was adaptable to both childminders' and children's needs and skill level, and all but one childminder found the main sessions and additional sessions easy to fit in and deliver.

5. The programme had positive effects on parents' engagement and confidence. Activity cards were a useful way to engage parents and, according to some practitioners, they were particularly useful in supporting fathers' engagement.

Summary of challenges

1. One of the main challenges was that some of the suggested activities were not always suitable for children aged below three. Some childminders who worked with younger children, felt certain activities were not always appropriate for younger children, particularly young children with already existing delays around their language and communication skills.

2. A linked challenge was delivering the focus session within the 45-minute suggested timing. Childminders reported that their younger children (two-year-olds) sometimes did not stay engaged throughout the focus session. In response to this, some childminders split the activities into shorter sessions spread throughout the day.

3. Engaging parents was a challenge mentioned by several childminders. Several childminders dealt with this challenge by communicating via WhatsApp or email.

4. Another set of challenges was situational. These are challenges that relate to factors childminders had no control of, such as children being sick, losing interest, not being in a mood to engage, or library opening and closing times.

Summary of key reflections

1. We would include more detailed adaptation advice for younger children in the toolkit and provide a broader range of activities to choose from, to assist childminders with engaging children below the age of three in some of the activities. We would also strengthen the child-led messages and include guidelines on delivering the focus session according to the engagement and abilities of the children, e.g., spending longer than the suggested timings if children are fully engaged or spreading the focus session activities over the day. Splitting activities throughout the day may be particularly appropriate for childminders who care for children younger than three.

2. We would strengthen the messages around integrating language-supporting activities into daily routines, to further facilitate childminders' engagement with parents. Childminders could use these to emphasise to parents that activities can be easily included into daily routines without additional effort. This can be coupled with suggestions and resources for digital parental engagement, such as short weekly coaching videos or instruction packs, as many childminders reported communicating with parents via WhatsApp, Facebook, or email. However, to better understand the challenges around engagement, and what parents would find helpful to address them, a focus group with parents could be insightful.

3. We would reassure childminders more in the initial stages of the delivery, by being more explicit about a possible accommodation period during the first couple of weeks of delivery, when the structure may feel a little foreign. We would explicitly note that this will most likely fade away as the programme gets embedded into a daily routine, and both the practitioner as well as the children become increasingly familiar with it. Explicitly encouraging the childminders to adapt the programme to the needs of their children, and the requirements of their days may increase their sense of ownership of the programme.

4. Other potential adaptions that can add value to childminders' experience include, providing a full list of the resources needed at the beginning of the training/programme, prompt cards and guidance about how to adapt an activity, should the resources or destination suggested not be available to childminders.
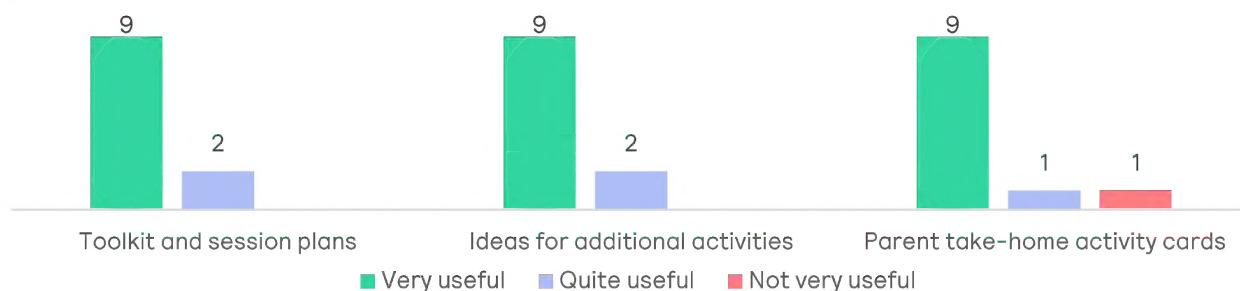
Training and programme delivery

Childminders received four hours of in-person training in September 2023. They received a toolkit with session plans for six focus sessions and additional ideas for repeating the focus activity and language-supporting strategies during the rest of the week, to consolidate children's knowledge and engagement. Childminders were also given activity cards to share with parents to encourage repetition of the activities in the home learning environment (see **Figure 1**). All but one childminder found all these resources useful (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 1. Materials received by childminders to assist them with programme delivery
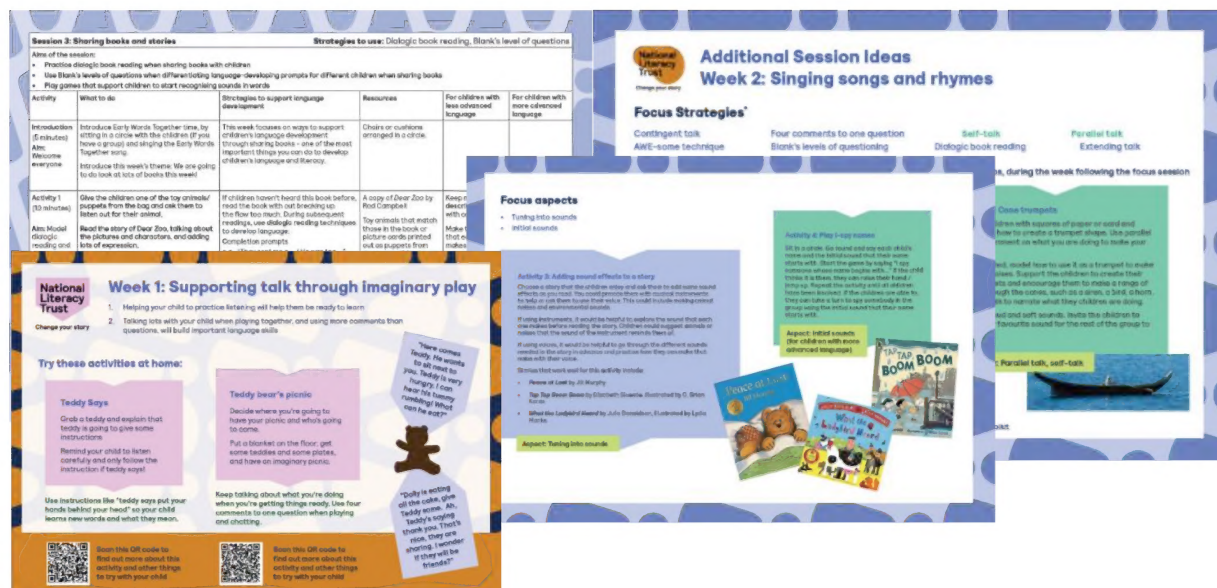
Figure 2. Usefulness of programme materials.

All childminders said the pre-programme training was 'very good' (*n* = 10) or 'good' (*n* =1). **Figure 3** shows that at the end of the training, all practitioners felt confident to deliver the programme sessions and put learning into practice. All of them also felt confident to share focus activities with parents through coaching sessions and equipped to increase their confidence around supporting early language.

10 of the 11 childminders felt that after the training, they had an increased understanding of child communication and language. Comments from open-ended questions reveal how childminders felt the training prepared them to deliver the programme to the best of their ability and was, overall, useful, suggested novel strategies and ideas and challenged childminders in a positive way:

"I'm comfortable with the level of training and there is a lot of support in the materials."

(the most valuable aspect of the training was) "Understanding the strategies, discovering new books, building a network of other childminders."

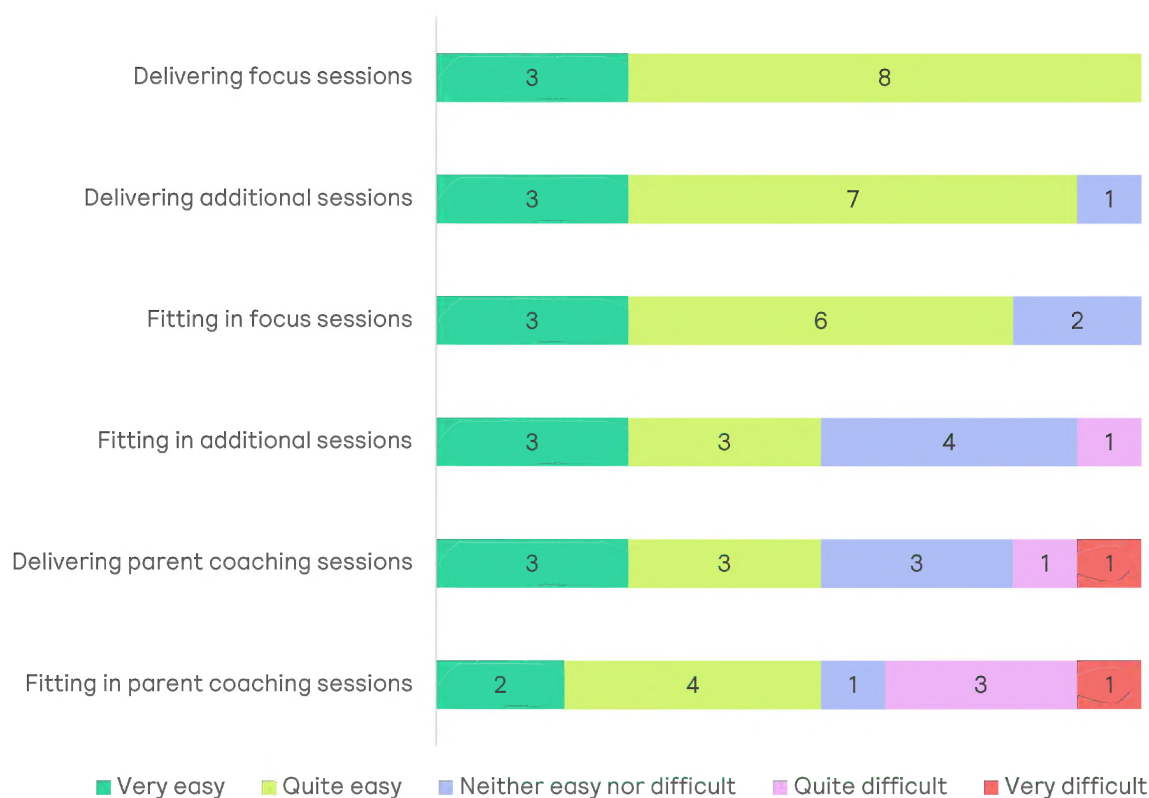*"Learning focus strategies. Being challenged to do more structured activities."*

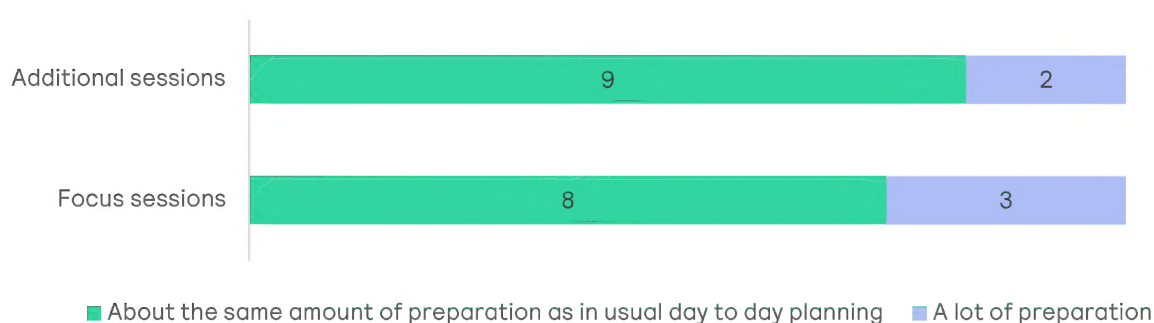**Figure 3.** Practitioner feedback after the pre-programme training.
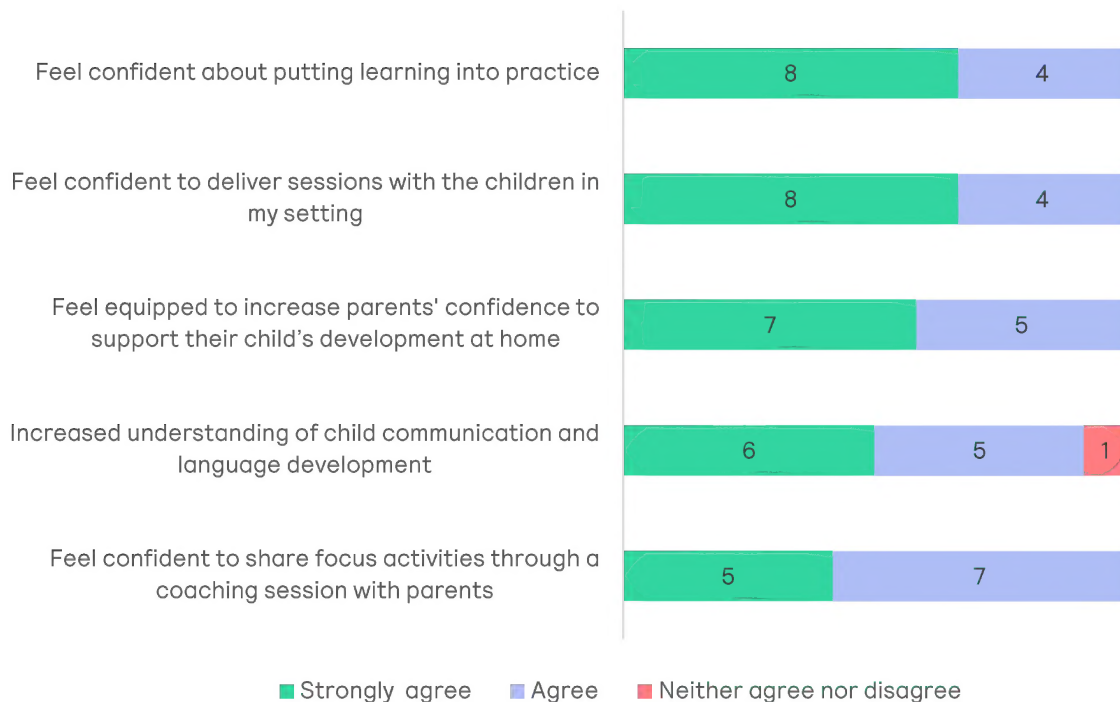
Early Words with Childminders and practitioners' day-to-day practice

Despite initially needing some time to adjust and become familiar with the programme's content and structure, at the end of delivery, most childminders said they found all programme sessions easy to fit into their day-to-day practice and easy to deliver (see **Figure 4**). What's more, this was reflected in their comments during the post-programme focus group and supported by the fact that most childminders said they did about the same amount of preparation for the programme sessions as they would for their usual, day-to-day sessions (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 4. Easiness to fit in and deliver the sessions.

Legend: ■ Very easy ■ Quite easy ■ Neither easy nor difficult ■ Quite difficult ■ Very difficult

	Very easy	Quite easy	Neither easy nor difficult	Quite difficult	Very difficult
Delivering focus sessions	3	8			
Delivering additional sessions	3	7	1		
Fitting in focus sessions	3	6	2		
Fitting in additional sessions	3	3	4	1	
Delivering parent coaching sessions	3	3	3	1	1
Fitting in parent coaching sessions	2	4	1	3	1

Figure 5. Preparation before delivering the sessions.

Legend: ■ About the same amount of preparation as in usual day to day planning ■ A lot of preparation

	About the same amount of preparation as in usual day to day planning	A lot of preparation
Additional sessions	9	2
Focus sessions	8	3

For most childminders, the parent coaching sessions were the most challenging to deliver, and the analysis of qualitative data suggests this was mainly because pick-up and drop-off are busy times, and it was hard to find the opportunity to have a coaching session.

"For the main session, it was something to get used to and we ended up spreading the main session through the day. It wasn't hard to fit in as such [...]. However, it was more to do with having the children sit down, engage, and focus for a different style of activity which was hard to time manage and deliver at the right time. This got much easier towards the later [sic] half of the programme."

"The ease of delivering the additional sessions was always pretty good and got even easier through the programme. They were easiest to pick up at a time suited to us without having to prepare lots and think about when I would deliver the session. They were able to fit in at any time and on any day and mostly at a variety of settings."

"I have found it tricky to deliver the coaching sessions with parents and mindees coming and going at the same time whilst passing on the most important information for the day. It's felt a little awkward at times as my relationships with the parents are less formal than one might have at a nursery. If I was to do this again, I might prepare a voice message or video message as a coaching session so the parents can watch at a more convenient time."

Despite the challenge of delivering the parent coaching sessions, childminders still successfully engaged with parents around the content of the programme. Five of the eleven childminders mentioned engaging with parents online and of these, four said they used WhatsApp to do this. Other childminders noted they had short chats with parents, or a larger session where they talked about the programme more generally.

(Delivering parent coaching sessions was) "at times difficult as my parents pick up just after school run when children are waiting for snack and getting coats off etc it can be a busy time when everyone needs me at once! but I emailed parents a lot to explain what we were doing and why and explained the cards to them at pick up time."

"I talk to parents daily at the door, on WhatsApp, email, Facebook and we also organised a parents social/parents evening where we discussed the whole project last week."

Adaptability

Adaptation was a common theme across childminders' experiences with the programme. Almost all childminders adapted some activities both to their children's age and capabilities, but also to the spontaneity of their days. Adaptation for younger ages was a very common theme, with many childminders feeling like the activities needed to be simplified for the younger children (i.e., aged below three). Childminders also adapted the length and/or the structure of the sessions by spreading activities throughout the day, extending or shortening the length of the sessions, or adapting the suggested activities owing to, for example, library inaccessibility. These adaptations ensured the activities better suited the interest, engagement and abilities of the children:

"I tried to deliver as close to the plan as possible but I did have to make a few adjustments around the children I had due to their age and interests."

"We started doing [the activities] to the plan but when the group was bigger the 4/5 [year-old] children, they struggled so we rearranged the order and spread it throughout the day."

It is important to note that childminders did not see the need to adapt the content as a negative challenge. Instead, most welcomed it and found the content and the structure of the programme flexible and easy to adapt to their and their children's needs. Childminders noted that such flexibility is necessary in their work, and they felt that this was a strength of the programme. All childminders said they are either very likely (n=10) or quite likely (n=1) to use the Early Words content in the future.

Childminder benefits: knowledge, confidence, and novelty

Childminders' experiences were positive overall and contributed to the development of their knowledge and their confidence (see **Figure 6**). Although this group of childminders had high levels of confidence and knowledge even before the

programme, after delivering it, most childminders reported increased knowledge of the evidence around supporting early language and literacy development, increased confidence to support children's early language and literacy, as well as increased confidence to deliver EPPE-evidenced activities.

Figure 6. Changes in childminders' confidence and knowledge after delivering the programme.
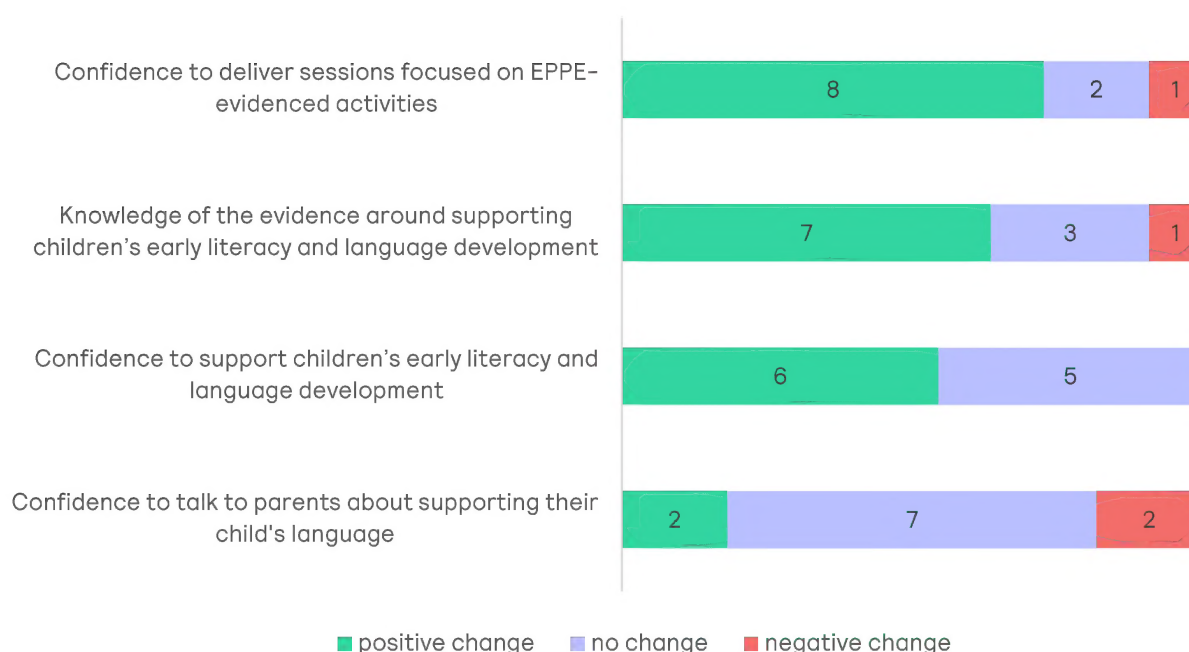
"Throughout the programme I have advanced my knowledge and had the opportunity to practise this in my setting. It's helped get me used to some of the techniques, therefore I feel more confident in using them now. I think my confidence will grow with this once I revisit and reuse the activities."

"Using particular techniques felt a bit unnatural sometimes but it made me think more about purposeful conversation."

"I felt quite empowered especially how I approached things"

"I have implemented a reading area within my setting and we do a daily story and rhyme time where children get to explore books of all natures. [...] I have also now introduced more wordless books and we also love books where the children can tell the story and use a variety of vocabulary."

As for their confidence to talk to parents about supporting children's language, most childminders showed no change in their initial confidence levels (n=7). However, all 7 reported high levels of confidence even before the programme, which may partially explain the lack of change. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, delivering the parent coaching sessions according to plan was a challenging part of the programme. A lack of opportunity to deliver more comprehensive parent coaching sessions, owing to time constraints, may also partially explain why some childminders reported no change in their confidence to engage with parents. Despite these challenges, the overall sentiment was that the programme had a positive contribution to childminders' engagement with parents, and on parents' engagement with their children's language (discussed further in the next section).

"This programme has shown me the more keen parents. As I plan to repeat the programme I feel I can get more parents involved."

"The programme was very positive for me as a practitioner, the children and the parents to feel more empowered to help their children and give them activity ideas".

"Delivering parent coaching sessions during the programme helped my confidence grow around these discussions, which in turn helped parents to understand more around where their child was and how they can help at home."

A strong theme across childminders' feedback was "novelty", and there were two key subthemes: "new ideas" and "challenged expectations" (see **Table 1**). Childminders felt that the programme gave them new ideas around activities and how to engage children, an aspect noted as a key strength of the programme.

The novelty theme was reflected in a somewhat different way by several childminders who noted that the programme was revelatory in terms of challenging their expectations about children's engagement, as well as their preconceptions and expectations about which parents would be engaged and which would not. This helped childminders learn new things about the families they work with. Childminders' comments from focus groups and open survey questions capture these two themes as expressed by the practitioners themselves:

Table 1. "Novelty" subthemes as captured in childminders' comments.

New ideas	Challenged expectations
"The programme has improved my knowledge on how to work on the development of children's literacy and language. [...] this programme has detailed activities I can use in my setting as well as techniques I can use to support language development."	"I've been surprised as to who was and who wasn't engaged."
"The programme gave me fantastic ideas. The tools supported me to put this into practice and I now feel more confident to plan an adult led activity based on and around early language development".	"Later that evening, I got a message about it [...] and she [the mother] just went: 'I've not seen my child engage in like that with me before. She brought the Teddy to me, I was trying to do bed bath time, and I thought, you know what, I'll just give it five minutes' [...] and I was just like 'well, that wasn't the response I thought I'd get'."
"I'm so grateful for being given tools to support my setting and their families. I will be repeating this and hoping for an even better outcome, even for me as I would have done it once therefore hope it would run smoother."	"My parents are very chatty anyway and I actually discussed the programme at my parents evening/social on Friday. 4 parents were really keen to carry on with some set activities and loved the structure to try with their children. This actually surprised me."
"I lack imagination and ideas for the children. So having the tools was amazing and supportive also for the children and families."	"But some [children], they've pleasantly surprised me with some of them [the activities], like the creative one with the bear in the rocket, we still got the rocket out, and it's being played with loads, they love that, and I thought that would go way over their head, and it didn't [...] So that's why I put eye opening [to describe the experience], because I thought I knew them [the children]"
"I have taken away some new ideas from the program that I will implement and use in my day to day setting from now on."	
"The activity cards and the ideas for new books that encourage language more"	

Child and family engagement

Child engagement and benefits

Childminders' comments revealed that children engaged well with and benefitted from the programme. While suitability of some activities for children aged 3 and below was identified as a challenge and childminders often had to adapt the activities for the younger children, virtually all felt that the programme had a positive effect on children's language and communication development. A couple of childminders mentioned that the programme contributed to the children's confidence. Several childminders noted that children with more diverse and complex speech and language needs, shy children, children who were selectively mute and children who spoke English as a second language engaged with the activities particularly well:

"My SEN[D] child was very engaged."

"I've got one quite shy child who, with some of the sort of self talk and parallel talk he's responded quite well to that and sort of coming up with you know, it's definitely developing his relationship with me and the other children and speaking up a lot more, so I think it's really helped him with his confidence. [...] . So, I think those approaches have been really, really useful for mine to just be able to have the confidence to contribute [...]."

"I only have children with English as a second language for them it's amazing experience as we can use, you know, they can build the language by that".

"So, I had a little girl who is three, and she was basically selective mute, she wouldn't talk for us, wouldn't answer questions, and after the first week of the Teddy says, we've heard her nonstop. And that shocked me. And I think that maybe the approach actually really worked for her. And I think it's working for the other children, but just tailoring it in our own way."

Child benefits – Case study

One of the childminders described how, much to her surprise, a 3-year-old who was selectively mute in the setting, but not in the home, showed drastic changes in her speech and engagement.

"So, I had a little girl who is three. and she was basically selectively mute, she wouldn't talk to us, wouldn't answer questions. And after the first week of the Teddy says, we've heard her nonstop. And that shocked me [...] and she is talking, she's saying sentences to us, things she's never said before."

On top of improved speech, the childminder noted that the child was happy and initiated engagement in activities in the home with her parents, something the child's mother appreciated and in turn encouraged her engagement.

"She's confident she's happy, she has enjoyed every single activity. She has then taken it home and made her mum do the activities too, so mum loves doing that, like seeing her progress and bring activities [cards] back."

Finally, the childminder noted how the child's emotional language seemed to develop through shared book reading of wordless picture books. The childminders' account captures their initial surprise at the child's intense emotional response to the wordless picture books, and an exploration of the child's emotions in partnership with her mother.

"[...] I bought some wordless books, [...] And I'm a bit apprehensive about the wordless books because I find them tricky, I don't know what to say sometimes and I know that sounds odd, but I find them tricky. Anyway, this little girl become obsessed with this book and every time we read it, she'd burst into tears. She wouldn't tell us why because she has these moments of refusing to talk to us. So, we gave the book to mum, and we said, 'can you read it with her and find out what it is that's making her upset?' Apparently, she was empathising with the dog, because the ball gets burst and she was bursting into tears. So, it's clearly developing her emotional language as well. It's like she just she felt like she could actually connect with it, whereas other books we read, she never connected. And she just kept bursting into tears, but then wanting to read it again, and we were like 'Oh, wow'."

Benefits for parental engagement and families overall

Most childminders said the programme had a positive effect on parents' confidence and engagement with children's language. For example, some childminders mentioned that parents seemed to become more confident around the fact that they do actually have the necessary knowledge and capability to support the development of their child's language and communication. A couple of childminders mentioned how fathers responded particularly well to activity cards as the clear instructions helped them to easily engage with their children's language.

"… [my child with SEND] and his parents, you could see his engagement, and I think it's just facilitated confidence in them that they are doing things right."

"It has really helped some dads who find it tricky how to occupy their children at home, so they have appreciated the help."

"I've got one dad who's a, he's a really great hands-on dad as in, he'll take the child out and lay bricks with his child, but he's almost like, he just feels like he's clueless about sort of helping the child and educating him. So, I think the mum's found it really quite amusing to give dad the card at the weekend to actually do these sorts of structured activities with the boy. But actually, he's really enjoyed it because it's written down, it's prescriptive, it's like following instructions to build something. And he says now, he can actually do this thing."

"As a result of this week's activity some of the parents are going to introduce wordless books at home too."

While only a few of the childminders received activity cards back from parents as evidence of an increase in engagement, many of them noted that parents found the activity cards particularly useful, as it helped them follow simple instructions which supported them to engage with their children. This seemed to empower parents and increase their confidence to engage in language activities with their children. This was reflected in the parent survey, where 4 of the 8 parents who completed it said the biggest impact the programme had on their family life was having ideas for more activities and spending more time doing these. Finally, some parents noticed changes within their families, since taking part in Early Words with Childminders.

"They [parents] loved receiving the cards and talking about the activities on them."

"My parents are very engaged in their children's learning and loved all the activity cards and taking part."

"[We are] talking more when out and about. Noticing weather changes." – Parent

"We're trying to do more activities as a family and the boys really enjoy it!" – Parent

Conclusion

Overall, all the childminder practitioners who took part in this first iteration of Early Words with Childminders, said their experiences with the programme were positive. Childminders noted benefits for their knowledge and confidence, children's engagement and confidence as well as parents' engagement and confidence. Data from feedback activities shows all childminders adapted the programme's structure and/or content at least once, but this was not noted as a negative aspect of the programme. Quite the opposite, childminders felt that having the flexibility to adapt the programme to the variety of their children's needs and their daily practice, was key for any programme to be successfully integrated into their practice.

In sum, the preliminary evidence summarised in this report contributes to the currently limited knowledge base around evidence-based professional development initiatives for childminders and indicates that Early Words with Childminders was a valuable professional development opportunity for childminders. As for potential benefits for children and parents, childminders noted positive effects on children's language and communication, their engagement and enjoyment of language activities as well as on parents' engagement with language activities in the home and with the childminders themselves.

Appendix

Both the number of children cared for by childminders and their qualification levels varied, although most childminders had a Level 3 qualification (see **Figures 7 and 8**). It is worth noting that 3 of the 9 childminders that cared for more than 5 children mentioned having assistants. Of these, 2 cared for more than 10 children. It seems that when childminders were caring for larger cohorts of children, having assistants helped with the delivery of programme.

In this group, there was no significant relationship between childminders' levels of qualification and their knowledge and/or confidence. However, the small number of participants and the small number of childminders with qualifications other than Level 3 means that comparison is difficult, and our results must be interpreted with caution. More data is needed to explore the link between experience, qualifications and childminders' confidence and knowledge around supporting early language.

Figure 7. Childminders' qualification levels.
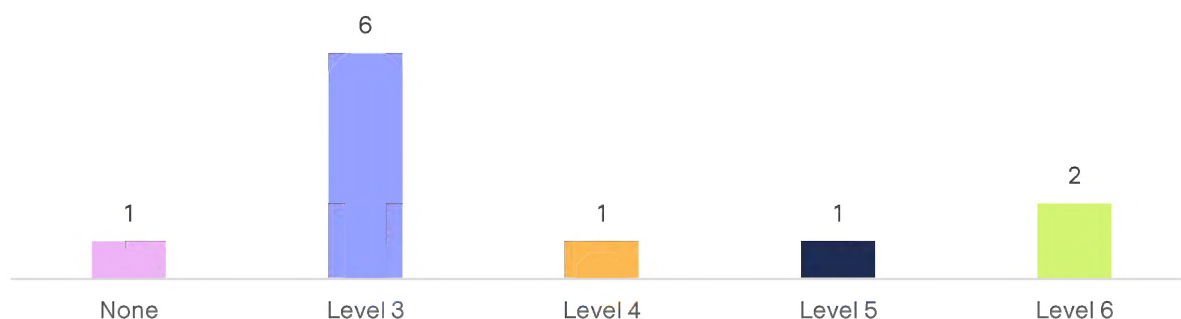
Figure 8. Number of children cared for.